OPEN PATH RESOURCES

An Analysis of Minnesota's Somali Youth

Out-of-School-Time:

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Institutions presenting the case:

Islamic Civic Society of America/Open Path Resources.

ICSA Identity
Islamic Civic Society of America (ICSA) demonstrates the compatibility between Islamic and Civic principles in a democratic society. Members of ICSA are dedicated to governing for the common good while addressing the specific needs of the Muslim community. The Islamic Civic Society of America Institutional Governing Document guides members in their commitment to advance ICSA identity while achieving goals.

Open Path Resources Identity: OPR advances the Islamic Civic Society of America’s identity by organizing the civic capacity and civic infrastructure between the MN Somali community and larger social systems to more effectively address public issues that impact the common good.

The Islamic Civic Society of America (ICSA) is the institutional member of Renewing the PublicCongregation—a faith based demonstration of the Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative (MACI).

The Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative is a cross sector base of institutions that use the Civic Organizing Framework to organize a new basis and base for policy making in the state of Minnesota that places the obligation to govern justly and wisely, in the roles we all have as citizens. This obligation, democratic and human, transcends other legal understandings of citizenship.

Background

In 2013, ICSA leaders established Open Path Resources an organization that hopes to provide ICSA with greater capacity to advance a civic organizing approach within the Somali community. Current ICSA’s 501c3 claims the institution’s core purpose is to advance its faith perspective. This faith driven purpose has made it impossible for ICSA to apply for grants or become a leader in some activities that require institutions to be nondenominational. OPR provides new routes to demonstrate that, like other nonprofits grounded in a faith perspective; ICSA can play a meaningful role working towards Minnesota’s common good.

Governing Members of the ICSA/OPR Organizing Agency: Abdisalam Adam, Board Chair, Imam Sharif Mohamed, Imam; Wali Dirie; Abdirashid Musse, Michael VanKeulen. Peg Michels COI/MACI resource.
ICSA/OPR purpose is to build an institutional infrastructure in this country that focuses upon the capacity of the community, prepares the Somali community to contribute to American society, and supports the community's desire to not lose their community's heritage, family history, and faith identity.

Minnesota has the largest Somali and East African immigrant community in the United State. Current population (2011) has been estimated to be in range between 32,000 and 124,768 Somalis (50,000 to 155,000 East Africans) in Minnesota. There is no clear and effective resource to quantify Somali and Somali heritage individuals in MN. OPR, through discussion with the state's leading demographers have determined that the safest estimates identify population to be near 72,000. Approximately 95,000 East Africans immigrants in total live in Minnesota.

The majority of the Somalis are under the age of 24 and this fact has a dramatic impact upon school enrollment and the sustainability of school systems, future workforce, and is associated with current challenges for youth like increasing drop outs, understanding between parents and youth (generation gap), and poverty and lack of hope that produces disengagement from the hopes and values of larger society. This age group, like immigrant movements before, will also be key to building the new economic social systems Minnesota needs to thrive in a 21st century globalization.

Large numbers in the Somali community are first generation immigrants whose interests are tied to fulfilling commitments to family left behind, continued political struggles in their homeland of Somalia, and their hopes for their future of that nation.

The immigrant experience takes place between the social systems that make up the Somali community, primarily families, religious organization and related non-profit community-based organizations. Additionally, the social systems that make up the larger Minnesota society directly impact the community— such as schools, government, and police.

In the process of immigration, the Somali experience reflects all immigrant experiences, which includes a breakdown within the community of traditional social structures and authority between the first and second generation. This breakdown has a great impact on the institutions of families, faith, and community as those structures also go through changes to adjust to mainstream influences.
The breakdown contributes an outcome that is a systemic source for many of the core problems experienced by the Somali community previously referred to. These systemic problems include; school dropout, breakdown of traditional family structures, economic stress, heavy reliance on state and federal welfare system, and an overall sense of powerlessness felt by too many in the Somali/American community of Minnesota.

Interventions through government agencies, social service providers, schools, and even the traditional Somali approach to family and community problem-solving do not develop enough capacity to address the systemic problems. A focus upon the capacity of the family and community members to become adequately self-sufficient and to maximize their civic contribution is called for.

**ICSA/OPR are positioned to address this challenge**

ICSA is highly respected and long established faith and civic institution within the Somali community. It was the first Mosque opened in MN by the Somali community. ICSA/OPR are seen as politically moderate organizations that bridges understanding between the mainstream and the Somali/Muslim community.

ICSA/OPR is already in the process of using a civic organizing approach to build its institutional infrastructure demonstrating the compatibility of Islam and democracy as they respond to challenges faced by the community.

**Particular Case Study Policy Issue:** Successful Youth Development for Somali Youth

ICSA/OPR leaders were presented an opportunity to make a case for their approach when they received a contract from Youthprise (a key institutional stakeholder in the case) to explore the relationship between youth development within the Somali community and the link to the existing Out of School Time (OST) programs funded by Youthprise.

Youthprise was launched by the McKnight Foundation to spark change and galvanize action to increase the quality, quantity and sustainability of opportunities for learning beyond the classroom for young people in Minnesota. Their mission is to champion learning beyond the classroom so that all Minnesota’s youth thrive.
Key Assumptions guiding the contract were based upon civic principles and standards in the ICSA Governing Document

• The Somali community in MN can identify its ideal for successful youth development and needs to be engaged to do so.
  o This ideal has value as we explore what is most beneficial to youth and community in OST and what is yet needed.
  o The exploration of the ideal will produce useful questions that relate to the way current OST programs are structured.

• The Somali community in MN has key resources to contribute to successful youth development. The community needs to be organized to leverage its capacity towards achieving this ideal.
  o Exploring capacity will have value as we try to understand and define what is common agreement between the community and OST program leaders on what constitutes successful youth development and what is needed to achieve that outcome.
  o The process will produce different points of view but the common focus on capacity will produce a greater chance to achieve common agreement.
  o The focus on capacity will challenge the current way stakeholder organizations operate based upon service, advocacy, electoral, and community-based principles. (See chart)

• There is a broad base of stakeholder organizations in the Somali community of MN representing a diverse body of community interests with many unique perspectives, backgrounds and connections.
  o Key to any analysis of the need for improving successful youth development within this existing organizational infrastructure is to engage and understand as broadly as possible their key interests.
  o These diverse stakeholders must help to define, address, and sustain solutions to challenges.
  o This assumption will cause community based systems to reflect upon their practice of governance.

• The key assumption is grounded in the over-all need to build a new institutional infrastructure in this country that focuses upon the capacity of the community, prepares the Somali community to contribute to American society, and supports the community's desire to not lose their heritage, family history, and faith identity. There needs to be an incentive and a way for existing stakeholders with complex interests within the community to organize this institutional infrastructure that interacts with the larger social systems.
We were transparent about our assumptions. However, following the civic standards that define a civic organizing process, we focused in the first phase of our organizing:

- Identifying the current assumptions driving current OST programs and
- Organizing a process within the Somali community that would begin to identify the need for more effective youth development from their perspective.

The outcome produced the following information organized in the following sections:

- The need for a new approach to youth development
- Proposed solution strategy to meet the need
- Next steps—Organize key stakeholders to test solution strategy.

The Need for a New Approach to Youth Development

A Brief Look At Research that impacts current OST Programs

Recent research on American school children in general suggests that we can name some things that seem to be working in Out-of-School-Time (OST) programming for mainstream youth and families. Research points to many positive potentials of youth being engaged in structured OST programs that provide:

- Improved meaning and understanding for the youth’s specific academic needs and goals.
- Positive and engaging physical, academic, social, and emotional experiences (Whole-Child) are needed.
- Engagement of families in producing child specific developmental outcomes and processes
- Activities that are getting beyond simple homework help
- Organized an interrelated part of a larger developmental support system.
- Child specific developmental goals that translate across and are inclusive of all aspects of the child’s support system.

While the research points to a child and community centered focus for OST programming, implementation and understanding of actual programming seems to have placed little attention upon community perceptions and self-interests. Definitions of what is working and what is worth evaluating tend to come from business, academic or government driven research. This research is often disconnected from the target community’s self-interests and perceptions. Such overreliance in this research can be meaningless or even harmful because:
• There has been a lack of connection and ownership in the process of defining the need for the program from the target community, which results in little participation.

• Lack of ownership can lead to responses that see money as the key resource rather than a focus on effectiveness, sustainability, and their role in achieving those ends.

• Information supported by research is organized into "programs" structured as "services" provided to "customers" to be consumed. Advocacy programs can argue for more access to these programs, more dollars to produce and consume programs, and communities can do the same. However, a service-driven and advocacy approach do not necessarily provide incentive or demand that all stakeholders own the larger purpose for successful youth development within a democracy, define and contribute to addressing the barriers to achieving that end within each stakeholder institution starting with families. In addition, there is very little incentive or ways for stakeholder institutions to work together to ensure that successful youth development happens in the relationship between families-community-schools-government-business.

**Our Interview Process** to get a community perspective of the definition of successful youth development and their experience with current OST programs.

Over a 6-month period of time the staff of OPR met with more than 40 Somali immigrant youth, 25 East African community and institutional leaders, families, faith leaders from 8 different centers from within and outside of Somali community.

Communities engaged: Twin Cities Metro, Mankato, Owatonna, Rochester, and St. Cloud.

In the interview process we sought to answer the following key questions:

• What is an ideal 24 year old like?
• How do you define successful outcomes of youth development in the Somali community?
• What is the current capacity to achieve these ideals?
• In what areas do you feel institutions can help? Defining roles.... Youth, family, faith, community leaders, other in producing these ideal outcomes."
• What areas need further information? What do we need to know?"

**The Results Produced The Following Understandings:**

1. We learned about essential aspects of community identity
The Somali communities of Minnesota like any other community hold the development and success of their children as a central goal.

Transition from East Africa to Minnesota over the past twenty years presented both opportunities and barriers to successful outcomes for Somali youth.

Minnesota is home to the largest population of Somali-Americans in the United States for good reasons, including job opportunities, a welcoming environment, quality schools, affordable housing, and desire to live near relatives in an established Somali community. The Cedar Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis has been the starting point for many Somali-American families.

2. Over the last twenty years much has changed within the community and much has changed in their relationship to mainstream culture, government systems, and institutions.

Over the last 20 years the Somali community of MN has increased their own interest in participating within the mainstream American school systems. They hope for the academic outcomes that will produce the best possible citizen. But they wonder how families and communities can play a vital role in that positive outcome through efforts in and out of school systems.

The Somali community has become increasingly active in Minnesota politics. The Cedar River Neighborhood has become a hotbed of political activities and has even produced the state's first Somali/American city council member, Abdi Warsame and current Minneapolis School Board member Mohamud Noor.

There has been significant interest among national, state, and local government agencies to increase engagement of the Somali community in existing Minnesota systems.

3. The community has expanded which has increased impact to the existing social system in Minnesota:

There have been numerous charter schools opened over the last 15 years with as many as 7 charter schools serving a nearly 100% East African immigrant population – well over 1500 students k-12 attend these schools. There are questions being raised in the Somali community as to whether or not these schools are the best option – the tension between heritage and identify protection and a desire to fit into mainstream are often the focus in the community analysis of these charter schools.

a. There continues to be a secondary migration of the Somali community from Minneapolis into Greater Minnesota, including large concentrations in Rochester, Mankato, St. Cloud, Eden Prairie, Burnsville, Fridley, Marshall, etc.

b. This migration has brought an influx of youth into aging communities and new pressures on school systems less familiar with English language learners.

The Somali experiences specific to OST in Minnesota have changed significantly over the last 20 years
1. The civic orientation of the Somali population in Minnesota is shifting from a focus on issues in Somalia to a focus upon building a positive future here in Minnesota.
   • The Somali community is increasingly questioning their early emphasis upon a self-imposed cultural protectionism or isolation. Diversity and inclusion are seen more positively though no clear models have been organized.
   • There is a trend that can be seen, as an interest in integrating into "American" society and is now the norm as long as family identity and faith are fostered in the process.

2. Resources that would encourage community-based leadership or community-based programming have decreased.
   • Programs provided from outside the community base exists but they are seen as either unsupportive or antagonistic to Somali heritage and faith.
   • At the same time there is an increasing numbers of Somali families seeking support from the mainstream institutions to improve their situation especially in education as they become aware of a very large achievement gap.
   • Families are now left trying to engage large, unfamiliar, and untrusted systems to address their children’s educational and developmental needs. There has been little evidence that these large systems have the capacity or even interest to support a community’s vision for what will make a fully developed Somali/American citizen.
   • Community members do not have a cohesive infrastructure grounded in the faith-based ideals of their community and one that calls them to the work of defining and acting on a common ideal for youth development from the community perspective. This gap means they have less incentive to imagine and then take an active role as a community in meeting the needs of the youth by working in partnership with existing programs in the OST mainstream.

Community-based critiques of existing OST programs

1. Institutions that run OST programming are not focused on the role that family plays in youth development.
   • Families desire academic success for their child, which includes an ever-increasing emphasis upon homework help. But programs tend to lack meaningful family involvement efforts. Most of these programs engage only the youth and do not support staff members that know they need to partner with the family. These staff members have no time or resources to support the families’ desire to be a part of the child’s learning experience. This creates a dynamic where learning is solely in the domain of child to school and parents have a confusing or minimal role.
   • The recent emigration from Somalia to Minnesota has created great changes in the family systems. Many men in the Somali community are struggling to reshape their role within family and community. Many men are not actively engaged in development of the youth in their
family and community. This is a serious gap to address for any standard for any successful youth development program.

2. Programs do not adequately value faith-based institutions that are community-based or supportive to heritage identity, faith, or connections to community formation.
   - Faith institutions have had a traditional role in supporting youth in OST. Their resources have always been severely strained. Most recently they have become even more diminished. These faith-based institutions no longer have resources for significant outreach and programming support for youth. The interest may be there, but the fiscal resources are not and so the interest cannot be tested.

3. Funding for the standard state sponsored after-school programming is very weak, around $3.30 per youth per hour. Most programs cannot sustain with this as the sole source of funding support. The result is that larger institutions gain grants, or have agency capacity and this leaves small community-based organizations and their family organizing capacity unable to participate. This pattern results in a concentration of OST support being removed from smaller community-based organizations and from the accountability mechanisms that were grounded within the community. These community-based organizations are where essential resources of time, knowledge, and influence should be leveraged.

4. Existing OST programming tend to speak to the value whole-child skills but place heavy emphasis upon purely academic-focused support. Government systems focus evaluation of OST programs on narrow academic goals.

5. Communities outside of the Twin Cities metro have very few or narrowly purposed out-of-school time programs to engage Somali youth.

What are common outcomes of the current situation?

1. Existing OST programs believe that the primary need is for more funding.

2. Community leaders believe their primary need is lack of funding.

3. This definition of the need is a barrier to looking more deeply into the role each play-existing OST programs, community based programs, and the community-in achieving what appears to be some common ground on what would constitute an effective youth development experience.

"Our faith institutions need to be better at reaching out to our youth."
- Hashi

“Youth have become consumers of their own development not a partner.”
- Hindia
Summary of Findings

1. The Somali community members interviewed identified three pillars that define successful development of the Somali-American youth:

   **Well-Educated Youth.** This implies an education that takes advantage of American models of learning and career potential connected to a developed sense of cultural identity.

   **Youth Grounded in Heritage and Faith.** Universally respondents felt it vital that youth are grounded in an identity that is based in family heritage, values, language, customs, and community and faith. The principles of faith are not widely seen as compatible with democratic principles.

   **Active Citizens in Their Local and Global Communities:** Successful development produces well-educated youth who are connected to and contribute to their families and community, and who are wise and active global citizens. There is a lack of ownership of the governing obligations of that identity of active citizen as this is a struggle in mainstream culture.

2. The process produced evidence that the description of “good or successful” youth development in the Somali community is not different from what other communities would describe. This indicates there is a basis for defining “the common good” which could be the basis for providing a common purpose for organizing the existing infrastructure that seeks to achieve that outcome.

3. There is an amazing amount of institutional infrastructure in Minnesota (both within and outside of the Somali community) dedicated to achieving “good-successful” youth development including those institutions and organizations identified as “Out of School Time-OST” programming. Yet there is evidence that existing approaches to governance grounded in service based, advocacy, and community based principles provides incentives to fragment, isolate, and compete against each other for the scarce resources that fund OST programming.

   **What is the primary barrier to address?**

   Existing approaches to governance and policy making that defines existing systems:

   - Provide incentives for fragmentation, inadequate coordination across sectors and organizations and a competition for resources. The outcome means that the existing infrastructure does not produce the imagination and resources needed to address the complexity and scale of what it means to do “good youth development”.

   - Do not promote the need or hold members accountable for developing the common governing role of active citizenship, which
holds each individual responsible for achieving “good” youth development in the places where they have the authority to do so. And accountable for working with others who share the same concern.

- Do not imagine the family as a “policy institution” with the primary obligation to develop its members to be active citizens capable and responsible for defining and achieving e “good development” for the family, and the means to interact with other institutions to support that outcome.

Conclusion: The problem is grounded in the way systems imagine and do governance. Unless this systemic governing barrier is addressed, more resources dedicated to advancing “good youth development” will sustain approaches to youth development that do not address the identified need.

PROPOSED SOLUTION STRATEGY:

ICSA/OPR is testing a new approach to policymaking as a solution strategy for solving the complex problem of “good youth development” within the Somali community-called civic policy making. The approach is grounded in civic principles and standards for practice and methods to meet them and it is called civic policy making.

It starts with asking individuals to first of all relate to the over-all process of policy-making teaching key stakeholder there are 3 essential functions involved in the process of policy making:

• Problem-definition-The way a problem is defined is based upon a principle or value-something that is thought to be good-a hoped for outcome.
• Problem-solving-The actions taken and resources leveraged to solve the problem as it is defined.
• Rule-making-The decisions made in the process of defining, solving, and sustaining solutions to the problem. This policy process includes the decision to follow the rules, ignore them, or establish new rules in the process. It also includes the formal rules and regulations established to reward or sanction particular behaviors.

Literal definition of policy making can be summarized as a Principled Course of Action

Every individual is a policy maker in that they define problems, solve problems, and participate in rulemaking as part of everyday life.

Their decisions and actions that follow impact the common good whether they imagine that or not.

Every institution-family-faith-community-workplace-education-governance is a place where policy is produced. Problems are defined-solved-and rules are made, ignored, enforced. This policy function is meant to achieve the principles, and purpose for the particular institution.
Civic organizing does not replace necessary services, advocacy, and community identity. It strengthens those approaches to better achieve the principles they stand for.

Through our ICSA/OPR civic organizing agency we are organizing pilots to test the capacity to build civic capacity and a civic infrastructure inside institutions that impact families/youth in the Somali community: families, communities, congregations, schools and universities, businesses, non-profits, government agencies, and to build a cross-sector base of institutional partners who:

- Define problems, solve them, and create policies from inside the places where we spend our time and have the authority to act;
- Work through the tensions between our understanding of “good youth development” guided by civic principles and standards that apply to all.
- Create civic policies that hold all stakeholders accountable sustain the process while advancing solutions that have positive and lasting impact.

**Our Next Steps:**

1. ICSA/OPR will continue to make the case for the family as center of civic policy-making – test if the outcome increases capacity to produce and sustain the knowledge and resources needed to achieve family and larger community goals.

2. Implement civic leadership development for Somali families grounded in the compatibility between Islam and democracy grounded in civic principles and standards that can be applied within all institutions.

3. Identify Islamic faith based centers to engage youth and families to support all three pillars of education, grounded identity, and civic obligations.

4. Seek support for a civic policy making pilot to produce evidence that proposed solution strategy meets the need. The pilot will organize a base of institutional partners who will produce and track pilot outcome and from those outcomes propose specific “policy recommendations” to be implemented within their institutions. In addition, pilot members will continue to interact and convene the broad base of institution/organizations who impact the issue of youth development in Minnesota to share and get feedback on findings. The outcome will aim to produce the capacity to build and sustain the base of diverse institutional partnerships needed to address the complex issues impacting East African youth and families in the state of Minnesota.

“We need an environment that is not antagonist to the faith promoted in our families.” - Said

“The children must own where they are going, how they belong, and the community must guide them to where is potential.” - Raho